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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9591
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RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 2331
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SUBJECT: Burma: Meeting with State-Run Newspaper "New Light of Myanmar"

Summary

1. (SBU) On November 5, Public Affairs staff visited the Rangoon headquarters of the New Light of Myanmar (NLM) -- the government-run English language daily newspaper. The editors, who in background and manner are more akin to bureaucrats than journalists, admitted their paper is a propaganda tool that cannot compete with private papers except on price. The visit was timely -- most NLM staff had just received orders to move to the new capital Nay Pyi Taw. End Summary.

Participants and Background

2. (SBU) PAO, APAO, and senior press specialist visited the downtown Rangoon headquarters of NLM on November 5 -- the first such visit by Embassy staff in recent memory. Chief Editor Than Myint Tun, several deputy editors, and a chief editor for the Myanmar News Agency (MNA, the government news service that supplies all of the articles for state-run media) were present. Apart from Than Myint Tun, none have a journalism background. A couple joined the NLM as editors by taking a civil service placement exam.

3. Burma has three state-run daily newspapers: Kyemon, Myanmar Ahlin, and NLM (which is an English translation of Myanmar Ahlin). All of the papers and MNA are part of the Myanmar News and Periodicals Enterprise, which falls under the Ministry of Information. The claimed daily circulation of the New Light of Myanmar is 20,000. The combined daily circulation of Kyemon and Myanmar Ahlin is a claimed 300,000.

"We Boast of Our Country's Achievements"

4. Than Myint Tun and his staff seemed ill at ease throughout the meeting. They contributed very little to the conversation and replied tersely to our questions. Nevertheless, it was apparent that they understand their role to be a propaganda mouthpiece. Than Myint Tun said his paper aims to "boast of our country's achievements, and how we are doing our best." He insisted that he has final say on the layout and content of his paper, though he said the editorials are written by MNA staff. When asked how NLM stays competitive with privately run weekly newspapers, a deputy editor simply said, "Our paper is very cheap." (Note: the NLM costs about five cents per issue, compared with 40-50 cents for privately owned papers.)

15. Since the meeting took place one day after EAP Assistant Secretary Kurt Campbell's meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi, which an NLM photographer had covered, we asked why that day's edition did not include a photo.) The chief editor responded that there was "no space." NLM very seldom covers U.S. Embassy and USG activities. In October, the editor and two NLM reporters attended a press briefing by the Charge d'Affaires on the U.S. Burma policy review, but the paper never carried an article on the event.

Moving to Nay Pyi Taw

16. The NLM staff confirmed reports that NLM and the other state-run newspapers were in the process of moving the bulk of their operations to Nay Pyi Taw. Most of the NLM chief editors and deputy editors were planning to move. The paper will keep some reporters and staff in Rangoon and maintain printing presses in both cities.

DINGER